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ABSTRACT

Teachers are evaluated daily by their students. By examining students' criteria for teacher evaluation, teachers are able to broaden their existing base of understanding and develop a greater perception of the complex dynamics of the classroom. This study was conducted to evaluate students' comments regarding "good" teachers to determine whether the students employed consistent, distinct criteria for evaluation. A class of sixth-grade middle school students (N=22) were interviewed individually to determine their perceptions of good teachers. Primary questions were: What do you think a good teacher is? What do you expect from teachers? and What advice would you have for beginning teachers? Three distinct themes regarding the efficacy of teachers emerged from students' comments: (1) instruction; (2) personality; and (3) classroom management. The comments indicate that students are actively assessing teachers according to independently derived discrete and consistent criteria. Frequency of comments in distinct areas and percentage of students commenting in each area are displayed in tabular form. (LL)

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Sixth Grade Students' Perceptions of Good Teachers

Janene K. Gorham

Abstract

The perceptions of students may offer educators a different and constructive view of the dynamics of a classroom. A class of 22 sixth grade students was interviewed to determine their perceptions of good teachers. Three distinct themes regarding the efficacy of teachers emerged from the students' comments: (a) instruction; (b) personality; and (c) classroom management. The students' comments indicated students are actively assessing teachers according to independently derived discrete and consistent criteria.

Sixth Grade Students' Perceptions of Good Teachers

Researchers have spent considerable effort determining criteria for evaluating the efficacy of teachers. Consequently, practicing teachers are evaluated both formally and informally by criteria established by such research. Teachers are further evaluated daily by their students. The criteria students use to determine whether a teacher is "good" may differ from what the teacher understands as effective teaching strategies. By examining the students' criteria for teacher evaluation, teachers are able to broaden their existing base of understanding as well as develop a greater perception of the complex dynamics of the classroom.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the comments of sixth grade students regarding "good" teachers to determine whether the students employ consistent, distinct criteria for evaluation. The students will not be prompted with any characteristics or criteria suggested important by previous research

but will be allowed to derive the characteristics themselves. The criteria suggested by the students should prove beneficial to teachers by not only revealing the potentially unique way in which students perceive the efficacy of the teacher but further illustrating how these perceptions affect the dynamics of the classroom.

There has been mounting interest in the viewpoints of students as interpreters of classroom dynamics as research has shown that not only are students constantly and actively interpreting their classroom environment but also are employing those interpretations to shape their actions within the classroom (Mergendoller and Packer, 1985). Students' thoughts and actions are directly related to their perceptions of their environment as they are constantly reassessing their environment in order to make decisions on behavior and attitude. Weinstein (1983) found that "being aware of students as active interpreters of classroom events forces teachers to examine more closely the effects of their own behavior on the recipients of these interventions." Estvan and

Estvan (1959) maintain that teachers need to make an attempt to understand each child's world if they are to be effective. Research on social cognition has added yet further reason for teachers to examine the classroom from the perspective of the students. The view of classroom dynamics from a child's viewpoint and an adult's viewpoint are often quite distinctive which may prove to hinder communication (Weinstein, 1983). Specifically, research of students' viewpoints regarding teachers and instruction at the elementary and secondary level is important and necessary because traditionally efforts to retrieve student opinions at those levels have been much less rigorous or frequent than at universities or colleges.

By attempting to discover students' perceptions of teachers, one can learn much more than an isolated description. Mergendoller and Packer (1985), found that in seventh graders' description of teachers that students revealed "their likes, dislikes, fears, accomplishments, and frustrations," as well as "their expectations for how an effective, successful, and likable teacher should act." Weinstein (1983)

contends that such information in the hands of educators serves to "increase our sensitivity to the multiple challenges that classroom life poses for students."

Along with increased sensitivity and awareness that students often possess perceptions distinct from their own, teachers should further realize the range and complexity of perceptions that exist among students. Whitfield (1976) reports that while students do share many common perceptions, they possess many more that are unique. The idea that students possess many individual perceptions acts as a caution to teachers to guard against broad assumptions of students' perceptions. Teachers should further understand that it is unlikely that their actions in the classroom is perceived in exactly the same way by all students (Whitfield, 1976).

Some educators might question the value and accuracy of students' perceptions or evaluations of teachers, but many researchers contend that students' perceptions are very valuable and are accurate and honest in the context of the students' experience.

Developmental research has shown that with increasing age, students are able to perceive others as distinctive individuals, and further, the ability to attribute personality traits is developed at a young age (Peevers and Secord, 1973). Whitfield (1976) further maintains that students are capable of forming very clear perceptions of teachers and more importantly for the purpose of research, are capable of describing their perceptions through the identification of observable behaviors.

The issue of accuracy of students' perceptions of teachers is often argued among researchers. Coats and Swierenga (1972) maintain that "a kind of halo effect based on teacher charisma or popularity determines to a large extent how students react to questions about their teacher." Coats and Swierenga (1972), however, justify the value of research of students' perceptions of effective teachers by arguing that "charisma" is a function of teacher effectiveness that should not be discounted. Previous studies such as Jersild (1940) have shown that personality traits were most often the chosen characteristics of good teachers, however

Samuels and Griffore (1980) contends that students' perceptions might not be identical to students' perceptions of the past. In fact, Samuels and Griffore (1980) found that a good teacher is not necessarily defined only by personality traits but also knowledge of subject matter and effective teaching methods. Shedlin (1986) supports Samuels' results with his findings that while sixth grade students most often named personality traits when describing their "favorite" teacher, the students typically described their "best" teacher with comments relating professional teaching qualities.

While there have been many studies regarding students' perceptions of effective teachers that involve students' choosing or ranking preselected characteristics, this study will allow the students' to comment freely about their perceptions of good teachers in this way possibly discovering different or additional evaluative criteria used by students. Peevers (1973) asserts that "by taking the trait concept as a given, nothing is learned of how the person comes to use such concepts or of their relevance to him." Therefore, this study will not only attempt to discover what criteria students' employ in their evaluation of teachers but also why those criteria are

important.

Method

Subjects

The subjects of this study are sixth grade students at a middle school in a rural, largely agricultural county. The school, serving the sixth and seventh grades, enrolls around 325 students. The middle school is designed to meet the needs of its adolescent population as they make the transition from the elementary school to the high school. An entire class was selected for this study consisting of 8 females and 14 males ranging in ages from 10 to 13. The class is heterogeneously grouped by aptitude and achievement with the majority of average ability. The class is taught by a team of two teachers with additional teachers in the areas of physical education, keyboarding, and exploratory learning. Four students receive outside instruction from a resource teacher.

Design and Procedure

The students were each interviewed individually. Prior to the interview, the class was told that the study would be exploring how students their age viewed teachers, and they were further instructed to not use teacher's names or their own names during the

interview. Individually, the students were asked three primary questions. The questions were intentionally open ended and designed to elicit responses on the student's personal criteria for good teachers without suggesting any criteria or establishing any parameters.

The primary questions were:

1. Tell me what you think a good teacher is. Think of good teachers that you have had and tell me why you thought they were good teachers.

2. What do you expect from your teachers?

3. What advice would you have for someone who is going to be a teacher for the first time? What do they need to know or do in order to be a good teacher?

Once the primary question was asked, the student's answers were followed with general probes such as "Tell me more about that," or "What do you mean by that?" in order to elicit further response from the student without altering or directing his or her opinions.

Analysis

The students' responses were examined for consistent or discrepant themes in order to determine if students were employing common, distinct criteria for the evaluation of teachers. The themes were sorted into categories and then, evaluated for frequency in order to determine if an order of

importance could be theorized. The students' responses were further evaluated according to gender to determine if any correlation between gender and perceptions of good teachers could be postulated.

Results

Students' responses were evaluated for common themes, and three principal categories emerged: (a) instruction; (b) management; and (c) personality. Within each main category, there are often several subcategories of criteria. For instruction, students often mentioned (a) homework, (b) instructional method, (c) student understanding and achievement, (d) teacher help, and (e) student autonomy. The area of classroom management fell into two distinct subcategories: (a) rewards, and (b) discipline. The category of personality consisted of comments that can be grouped into three categories: (a) "nice" teachers, (b) teacher and student relationships, and (c) disposition as defined by personality traits not associated with being nice. Table 1 shows the distribution and frequency of the categories discussed by the students interviewed. Among the major categories, comments related to instruction were most common. Because students frequently attributed and associated some areas in their comments, those comments

were noted for each related area.

Insert Table 1 Here

Students comments were further evaluated according to gender. This study did not explore possible reasons for differences. but striking distinctions between genders can be found by examining the percentage of students commenting in several of the areas. Table 2 shows the percentage of students of each gender who commented in each area. Homework showed a noticeable discrepancy with 70% of the males mentioning it as opposed to 50% of the females. 63% of the females mentioned teacher help as compared to 29% of the males. 21% of the males commented on student autonomy with no similar comments from any of the females. 93% of the males and 75% of the females associated "nice" teachers with good teachers. The management category as a whole was dominated by comments from the males. In the category of discipline, 93% of the males mentioned it as compared to 50% of the females. 50% of the males and 13% of the females discussed rewards. While it is possible to note distinctions among the subjects of this study, the study was not directed to exploring possible reasons for such distinctions and will

therefore only note them.

Insert Table 2 here

Discussion

Instruction

The most prevalent theme throughout the comments of the students was that regarding instruction. Most common in the discussion of instruction were comments regarding homework. As one student said, "I don't think anyone cares for homework." The students overwhelmingly indicated that good teachers do not supply a student with an abundance of homework but rather one or two subjects a night. Many preferred that teachers "give you more of the work in class than you do at home, " and indicated that good teachers allow study halls or time in class to work on homework. None of the students, however, indicated that a good teacher assigns no homework. One student noted good teachers "don't give you a lot of homework, but they don't give too little homework, or you wouldn't know as much as the other students in the other classes." Students mentioned several reasons why homework was such an important concern. Some want to spend time with their family and friends. Some want to play

outside, and some are just tired of working after being in school all day. Regardless of their motives, for the students interviewed, homework is a critical issue in evaluating teachers.

Instructional method was the second most frequently mentioned area of instruction. According to the students, good teachers teach in exciting and interesting ways, often using games, simulations, field trips, experiments, and projects to spark the interest of their students. Good teachers avoid reading or working out of books, and consequently, their students find learning "fun," "easier," and "not boring." One student noted that good teachers "really get into it, not just teach it." Instead of "just giving hard math pages," a good teacher would "just think of a game that the class could play to help understand it better instead of just doing work out of the book." The students seemed to indicate that any activity that allowed for social interaction, movement out of the classroom, and the building or making of projects was representative of a good teacher's instructional method. Several students, further, mentioned that good teachers attempt to avoid repetition and do not perpetually teach the same material. According to the students, good teachers present new material in new and

varied ways.

The students who mentioned understanding and achievement consistently indicated that good teachers invest time and patience to insure the progress of individual students. The students seemed to appreciate the efforts of the teachers who would spend extra time with the individual who was having difficulty and not simply be concerned with the progress of the majority of the class. One student described a good teacher who "stopped along the way, and talked about it and stuff. Like other people, teachers, they just go through, and I don't really understand it." Good teachers "give you time to learn stuff, and if you don't learn it, they try to explain it to you the best they can." Students expressed frustration with teachers who "yell at you for not knowing it yet or give you bad grades just because you don't know it." Students again mentioned the negative aspects of repetition and their dislike of repeated instruction of concepts that they already understand.

Closely related to students' understanding was the teachers' role as a helper in the learning process. Students felt that good teachers made the effort to help students by continuing to explain concepts until they were understood. Students repeatedly mentioned

and emphasized good teachers were not only helpful but enthusiastic and eager to "explain things to kids if they don't know how to do it."

A few students felt good teachers allowed for student autonomy by permitting students to make independent choices and decisions regarding their own instruction. These students placed value on the freedom to make decisions such as where to sit, with whom to sit, projects, and how to spend their time on the computer.

Personality

Almost every student interviewed felt that a good teacher was a nice teacher, but there was some variation in how the students defined "nice." Some students associated nice with instruction, such as less homework, help with work, and exciting teaching, and still others associated nice with classroom management by noting rewards, such as extra recess, awards, or parties, or disciplinary methods, such as not yelling and giving students who misbehave opportunity to improve. Many students defined nice with other personality characteristics such as patient, sweet, and understanding, especially in regards to students' needs and desires. One student felt good teachers who are nice "think of what the students want and know what the

students like." Many more students defined nice by what it was not. Yelling, picking on students, making fun of students, ignoring students, and being "grouchy", "hateful", "mean", or "mad all the time" are all ways for teachers to not be nice. Several students noted that not only did good teachers not have to be nice all the time, but they should guard against being too nice because students will quickly take advantage of a teacher that is too nice.

Many students viewed the personality of good teachers as leading to the development of relationships apart from the relationship of student and teacher. One student spoke of a teacher who was extremely understanding of her students and "acted like a best friend to them." Several felt that good teachers did possess a special understanding of their students that allowed the teachers to put themselves in the position of their students. The students felt this understanding allowed the teachers to get to know the students on a more personal level. Teachers showed this by talking to students at recess, spending time with students before and after school, and displaying interest in the students' likes and dislikes. Students believed relating to students on a personal level was important for teachers to better understand and respond

to individual needs.

Several students did define the personality of a good teacher by terms not associated with being nice. One student maintained that good teachers "don't always go around looking sad and boring all the time. They have a smile because most teachers you see they just never smile." Other students reinforced the positive image of good teachers by commenting on their good sense of humor and their propensity for jokes and fun. Several students emphasized good teachers "were a lot more fun to be around" both in and out of the classroom.

Management:

Most students who discussed classroom management seemed to dwell on the negative aspects of discipline Almost all agreed that good teachers do not yell, and if they did, it was only in an extreme situation. Many also felt very strongly that good teachers did not punish the class for the actions and misbehavior of one student. Many students insisted a good teacher must be somewhat strict to "keep the kids from getting too rowdy," and maintain discipline and control in the classroom "because if students just have a nice teacher all the time, they will just do what they want and take advantage of the teacher." The students did believe

that a good teacher must take an active role in the management of behaviors in the classroom especially fighting, bullying, and teasing. Many expected good teachers to step into situations, such as a fight, as a disciplinarian and respond with negative consequences such as lost recess, detentions, or referrals. Several students believed that negative consequences are necessary as punishment for misbehavior "because they got to learn they can't be bad all the time."

Students also associated good teachers with positive reinforcers or rewards. The most common form of reward mentioned used by good teachers was extra recess, although candy, homework passes, parties, and student of the week awards were mentioned as well. Good teachers use rewards to respond to good behavior as well as academic success, "like when everybody in the class gets a hundred on a test, give us extra recess or something."

Conclusions

Students' perceptions have been shown to be valuable, accurate, and honest in the context of the students' experience. Through students' comments, educators can glimpse much more than the students' understanding of good teachers. The students' needs, desires, fears, and motivations are also revealed

allowing educators to sample the complex range of challenges that students face in the classroom. The awareness that perceptions exist that are different from one's own yields greater opportunity for increased communication and understanding.

This study shows that not only are these students actively evaluating teachers but are doing so in a manner somewhat consistent. From the comments of an entire class of 22 sixth grade students, discrete and compatible criteria emerged regarding the evaluation of good teachers. Many students associated and blended themes merely serving to illustrate the complex nature of classroom dynamics.

While some might warn of the "halo effect" that students endow on their teachers, personality played a lesser role in the discussion of good teachers than more professional teaching qualities such as instructional methods. Personality traits, indeed, were mentioned less frequently than more academic concerns such as homework. Many students mentioned classroom management often intermixed with discussion of personality traits of good teachers.

While it may be possible to note some gender differences among the areas of comments made by students, the purpose of this study was not directly

intended to explore or make conclusions for such differences. The study's results do indicate that further research would be necessary in order to determine a rationale for distinctions among students' comments regarding teachers and to make definitive conclusions. Further research might also be directed to exploring students' perceptions of good teachers at different grade levels to determine how perceptions might evolve as the students' progress through school.

By examining students' perceptions of teachers, educators are allowed a unique and distinctive impression of the events of a classroom. The examination of the perceptions of students should be helpful to teachers by deepening their awareness of the potentially exceptional way in which students perceive the efficacy of teachers.

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Table 1
Frequency of comments in distinct areas

	Frequency According to Gender		
Criteria	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**
Class	14	8	22
Instruction:	**29**	**16**	**45**
Homework	10	4	14
Method	6	4	10
Understanding	6	3	9
Teacher Help	4	5	9
Autonomy	3	0	3
Personality:	**20**	**10**	**30**
Nice	13	6	19
Relationships	4	2	6
Disposition	3	2	5
Management:	**20**	**5**	**25**
Discipline	13	4	17
Rewards	7	1	8

Table 2
Percentage of students commenting in each area

	Percentage According to Gender		
Criteria	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**
Homework	70	50	64
Method	42	50	45
Understanding	42	38	40
Teacher Help	29	63	40
Autonomy	21	0	14
Nice	93	75	86
Relationships	29	25	27
Disposition	21	25	23
Discipline	93	50	77
Rewards	50	13	36